

'Miracle' workers

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by PAUL WOZNIAK

Williamston Theatre delivers near perfect holiday show

The antique furniture and appliances, non-English words in spoken English, the guilt, and the stubbornness should all be familiar to anyone who grew up in a working class, ethnicreligious home. Playwright Tom Dudzick nails the Polish-Catholic family in "Miracle on South Division Street," which is no doubt transcribed from his own experience. In spite of its familiar character types and "traditional values"-themed story, Williamston Theatre's production, directed by Rob Roznowski, feels refreshingly original.

"Miracle on South Division Street"

Williamston Theatre 8 p.m. Thursdays- Saturdays; 3 p.m. Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays (through Dec. 28; no show Dec. 25) \$22-\$27 122 S. Putnam St., Williamston (517) 655-7469, williamstontheatre.org

Set in Buffalo, N.Y., Ruth Nowak (Emily Sutton-Smith) has crucial news for her two siblings and her mother, Clara (Ruth Crawford).

The story they were all told about their grand father and the miraculously appearing Virgin Mary statue in their neighborhood may not be factual. The details of this revelation are spoiler material, but they are identity changing.

Ruth's revelation propels the plot, but Clara's reactions shape the show. Crawford captures the tenacity and outspoken authority of a woman who values family and faith above anything else. When Clara expresses disappointment in her children, the audience cowers in shame.

Sutton-Smith plays the perfect foil, giving Ruth the unsteady backbone supported by knowledge of the truth. For Ruth and her siblings, telling unwelcome truths carries the same sentence from their mother as deliberately disobeying the rules. Tony Sump plays Ruth's levelheaded brother Jimmy with controlled restraint. Sump's low-key mensch beautifully counters Wendy Hedstom, as the sister, Beverly.

Hedstom is a kinetic force that brings all the actors' performances together. As the model mouthpiece for mom, Beverly hides her insecurities behind her bravado, but Hedstom provides that bravado real punch.

Bartley H. Bauer's stunningly realistic scenic design adds authenticity with chrome-lined countertops and a Formica-covered table and chairs straight from a 1950s museum display (or my grandparents' house). Michelle Raymond's prop design enhances the effect with an antique toaster and vacuum cleaner that, according to Clara, "still work." Perhaps the real prop highlight is the set of real (and criminally embarrassing) high school yearbook pictures of the actors hanging on the kitchen wall.



Dudzick's material is rather lowbrow and under a lesser director could veer into a broad caricature of working-class prejudices and ignorance. But Roznowski keeps the performances honest and the play from turning into an episode of "All in the Family." The pace drags in a few moments near the beginning and the end, but when the play does go sentimental, the tears in the audience feel well earned. It's a near perfect holiday show that hardly resembles a typical holiday show.

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